
 REVIEW: *A CACTUS OF TEARS* AND *THE TUYUHUN KINGDOM*

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Li Zhuoma 李卓玛. 2010. *Leizuode xianrenzhang* 泪做的仙人掌 [*A Cactus of Tears*]. Xining 西宁: Qinghai renmin chubanshe 青海人民出版社 [Qinghai People's Press]. 205pp. ISBN 978-7-225-03650-2 (paperback 18RMB).



Li Zhuoma 李卓玛. 2015. *Tuyunhun Wangguo* 吐谷浑王国 [*The Tuyuhun Kingdom*]. Xining 西宁: Qinghai renmin chubanshe 青海人民出版社 [Qinghai People's Press]. 617pp. ISBN 978-7-225-04933-5 (paperback 88RMB).

Li Zhuoma lives in the relatively remote Sangshige Village, Wushi Town, Huzhu Monguor (Tu) Autonomous County in China's northwestern, sparsely populated Qinghai Province. She is one of the first Monguor women to publish her work in Chinese and receive growing recognition for her writings, which are generally well-knit, featuring a modern narrative style enriched by Monguor cultural elements.

"Xue hua de chong sheng 'A Snowflake's Resurrection'" published in *Zhongguo Tuzu 'China's Tu Nationality'* (2011) is a nostalgic contemplation on the brief existence of snowflakes and a persistent hope for restoration resulting from multiple frustrations and life failures.

Published in *Qinghai Hu 'Qinghai Lake'* in 2016, "Hua'er Hua'er 'Flower, Flower'" invokes a traditional, deeply-imbedded image

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of females in Monguor folk culture. "Flower, Flower" depicts two generations of Monguor women, their struggle against convention and their pursuit of self-defined happiness. "Bleeding Loyalty," published in *Rainbow*,¹ a Huzhu County journal, recounts the legendary life of a policewoman as she battles social injustice to protect law and order.

Qinghai People's Press published *A Cactus of Tears* (2010), *Wodi jinghua 'Undercover Policewoman'* (2013), *Tuyuhun wangguo 'The Tuyuhun Kingdom'* (2015), and *Walan qingke 'Tile Blue Barley'* (2016). *The Tuyuhun Kingdom* is the first historical novel describing the migration of the Xianbei,² and the establishment of the first Tuyuhun³ Kingdom in Qinghai and its historical vicissitudes.⁴ This novel is sure to sit well with those who argue Monguor are Tuyuhun descendants, a contention disputed by those who claim that the Monguor are more directly related to the Mongols.⁵

Tile Blue Barley won Li an award and funding for "Eight Key Projects of Ethnic Minority Literature" from the China Writer's Association and "Key Works of Arts in Qinghai Province from 2015 to 2017." *Tile Blue Barley* portrays the lives of four Monguor women in four families in Rainbow, a fictional village situated in northwestern China. The four girls grow up together, struggle to survive the influence of family rivalries, have a chance at formal schooling, and ultimately take different paths in life, each with uncertain futures.

Li Zhuoma's literary works reveal her pursuit of ethnic identity, gender consciousness, and a balance between cultural clashes and accommodation. She is one of few modern Monguor women who walked out of mountain villages and obtained higher education in

¹ Reference to this publication is from Guo (2011).

² The Xianbei were the most important, largest federation of nomad tribes of the steppe region north of China during the Jin (265-420) and Northern Dynasties (386-581) periods (<http://tinyurl.com/jtfh8y4>, accessed 18 April 2016).

³ "...a branch of the Xianbei tribe established a state based in the Qinghai region and extending east into present-day Gansu. Called Tuyuhun, this state lasted more than three centuries" (<https://goo.gl/o3LiQo>, accessed 27 November 2016).

⁴ <http://tinyurl.com/zsqn48>, accessed 8 April 2016.

⁵ For a summary of such arguments, see for example, Cui et al. (2015:18-22).

urban areas. A top student in her local high school, Li passed the National College Entrance Examination and subsequently enrolled in Xi'an University of Posts and Telecommunications as an engineering major. After graduation, she found a job as an engineer in a telecommunication company in Xi'an - a Cinderella story of an impoverished minority girl from a rural area gaining a foothold in the uptown world through her own efforts. Unexpectedly, she quit her job in 2008, left the envied city world, and returned to her home region to become a high school Chinese teacher and part-time writer.

Living in urban China gave her opportunity to broaden her worldview. She returned home because

I want to find a tranquil place. I can better understand where and what I'm rooted in. I also want to encourage and enlighten more Monguor children who are experiencing what I went through; to ignite their dreams and ideals with literature (Guo 2011:53).

Instilling her own schooling and life experiences into her literary works, she followed a path of self-realization, peaceful return, and is making efforts to revive Monguor culture through literary creation.

A Cactus of Tears is deliberately written without ethnic, cultural, or religious clues. This represents the first phase of Li Zhuoma's creation. *Cactus* is an imaginary tapestry of urban romance and a good piece of bold experimentation in writing based on her reading repertoire. When interviewed about this novel, she confided:

I am greatly inspired by what I read. Words have their own penetrating power. While reading, I tend to learn the creative and artistic ideas from writers so as to better absorb the essence of art and further try to surpass my predecessors. I have a fondness for the ancient poems of the Tang [618-907] and Song [960-1279] dynasties. I love the images and scenarios in these poems of which I prefer the soul-inspiring images and refined verses. I write with my heart, for I believe that only true affections can touch readers and obtain resonance (Guo2011:53).

This novel is a combination of the impact of her experience of reading classical literature, her keen observations on life, and tentative explorations of the human psyche. Symbolic images, serial structures, catchy songs, Tang and Song poetry, colloquial dialogue, tangled relationships, enticing plots, and passionate characters - these traditional elements of fiction combine, giving the novel the ambiance of a movie complete with backdrops of constantly changing colors and poetic voice-overs.

The title of this novel is symbolically analogous to the protagonist Cheng Siyu, whose personality and fate are doomed as the plant's qualities are determined by nature. On the novel's back cover we find:

An ancient legend says at the very beginning of Creation, the cactus was the softest creature in the entire universe, as delicate as water, and the mere touch of a hand could cause its demise. God sympathized and endowed it with armor equipped with a layer of steel-like thorns. Afterwards, the cactus's heart was hidden inside its harsh appearance and had melted into tears of loneliness, for no one could ever see its existence nor any longer feel its softness. Thus the cactus's motto became: Be hard and strong!

This passage explains the title. This definition is repeated by Xu Ning who tells Cheng Siyu (Li 2010:123):

Siyu, I know why you like to keep a pot of cacti - because you are a cactus. Under your thorny and hurtful shell lies a crystalline, fragile heart. Please let down your guard and let me hold your hand for I will protect you from all harm. I hope that one day you will no longer wear your thorny armor.

This heart-breaking romance is set in Dongdu, a fictional Plateau city. The plot unrolls around the twenty-seven-year-old, cactus-like Cheng Siyu, a beautiful, intelligent woman. Her childhood was first traumatized by a father who abandoned his family. Then when Siyu was in high school, her strong-willed mother committed

suicide, leaving her with one family member - a younger sister who suffers from a congenital heart disease. Doing various jobs, Siyu is able to support them both and eventually see her sister through college.

At the outset of the story, Siyu shuffles from the hospital where her sister is often treated and the Dongdu City TV station, where she is a part-time scriptwriter. By chance, she participates in a dating program and performs an improvised recitation of a modern romantic poem. This performance attracts three men - the famous law-column TV host, Xiao Kejing, who is in his thirties; the show's sponsor - a forty-one-year-old entrepreneur, who is the head of the Jiajiale Company, divorcee Shen Jie; and the sincere script editor, Xu Ning, who is in his twenties. She is subsequently courted by the three men of different personalities and backgrounds.

Beauty, love, lust, hatred, revenge, sacrifice, death, temptation, and responsibility - all are intertwined and revealed in a complex web of relationships as the story develops. When Siyu realizes her step-sister, Yi Huali, is her rival for Xu Ning, she accepts Xu's gifts and dates him to take revenge on her step-sister and her father's new family. To help pay her own sick sister's medical bills, she takes a full-time job in Shen Jie's company.

Touched by Xu Ning's honesty, she finds herself in love with him. She gets drunk in Shen Jie's apartment and hallucinates that Shen Jie is her boyfriend, Xu Ning. In this intoxicated condition, she declares her love to him. Shen Jie then takes advantage of this situation and has sex with her. She subsequently changes jobs to escape her suitors.

Under Xu's constant care and encouragement, she is finally willing to recognize her real feelings about Xu when she realizes that her younger sister, Cheng Sinong, whose university professor is Xu Ning's mother, is also madly infatuated with Xu. Sinong suffers a heart attack upon realizing that Siyu is with Xu Ning. Torn by guilt and love, Siyu makes yet another sacrifice by leaving her true love and marrying the third suitor, Xiao Kejing.

No happy endings for the lovebirds in this story! In order to save Sinong's life, Cheng Siyu kills herself so her heart can be given to

Sinong via a heart transplant. Before she ends her life, she writes five letters addressing her ex-boyfriend, Xu Ning; her husband, Xiao Kejing; her sister; her father; and Shen Jie. In the epilogue, after successful surgery, her sister vanishes. Xu Ning wanders near her grave, waiting for her heart to return. Xiao Kejing becomes more successful in his career, yet loses interest in love. Shen Jie continues struggling in the jungle of business.

Four chapters named after the seasons of the year each begin with a poem from the Tang or Song dynasties, suggesting plot development with climatic changes echoing emotional turbulence. The entire cycle of life is thus represented.

This novel is commendable in terms of its exquisite language, colorful emotions, and well-balanced structure. It reflects a mixture of original simplicity and sophisticated imagination; a timorous, girly experiment in depicting urban life and highlighting the traditional feminist stereotype with the typical qualities of self-sufficiency, self-restraint, and self-sacrifice. In a male-dominated society, the cactus-like protagonist remains the observed being, the object of male observers, and the target of female competitors. The author's intention in trumpeting love, goodness, and justice in a society prioritizing material wealth is highly visible.

The general, Chinese-reading audience that enjoys reading popular romances for entertainment will find this text a good diversion. In many ways reading it is like watching a sitcom. Compared to the roller coaster plot, characterizations lack strength and are not entirely convincing. More impressive are the dialogues between individual characters, especially in comparison to a lack of vividness in the portrayals of their inner worlds. This makes the tragic outcome less poignant. Each character holds on to their stubborn, narrow-minded approach to life, alternating between being the tantalizer and the tantalized. In the end, it is all farce leading to death and resurrection, with a touch of nihilism and the scorn of vanity.

The Tuyuhun Kingdom

The two-volume, *Tuyuhun Kingdom* is a historical novel of a half million words. It is a chronological, fictional account of the Tuyuhun Kingdom starting from the story of the first king, Tuyuhun, and his westward migration from the Liaodong Plain early in the fourth century when he took a group of his followers to what is today known as Qinghai and established a "western nomadic empire, known by the name of its founder, Tuyuhun, [which] remained potent for centuries" (Holcombe 2001:131). The novel depicts several generations of wars and victories resulting in territorial expansion in northwest China, and ending with the heyday of the kingdom under the reign of Kualü (535-591; r. 540-591) (Dede 2010:122; Xiong 2009:280).

This novel is rich in creating national heroes and ethnic and cultural elements including religion and tribal customs. The language is beautiful and poetic, reflecting the author's solid foundation in the Chinese language and culture. Compared to her previous oeuvres, this novel provides a broad palette depicting geographical scenes and climate. There is much resemblance to a movie script with individual acts and different characters appearing in consecutive chapters and performing their roles. Different chapters tell stories of different generations, yet they reflect the repetitive essence of history, and cyclical patterns of life and human agency.

In general, characterizations lack depth and are unconvincing. Most heroes are similarly handsome and female characters are generally beauties. No specific portrait of personal traits is conceived. Despite varying social/tribal positions and gender, characters are uniformly informal, have a modern demeanor, and employ the same style of conversation. Verbal expressions are at odds with their identity and time, for example, feelings and emotions are extravagantly expressed through romantic dialogue. Such exaggerated, modern expression lacks the attraction that solemnity and "silence" brings to writing.

The historical narrative lacks vividness. Instead, it seems a reproduction of information from historical archives, serving as a

template for characters to carry out dramas of love and death. Furthermore, the plot is surprisingly similar to *Cactus*, with the author highlighting romance, female victims of sacrifice, and love triangles.

In the first chapter, for instance, the three tribal leaders fall in love with the same shepherdess and the plot unrolls as the girl is raped by one, captured by another for marriage, and then commits suicide for her true love, Tuyuhun.

Virginity is regarded as a woman's most sacred possession and the violence with which she is treated betokens male dominance over her as mere property. As the chapters come and go, triangular relationships repeat generation by generation. The leader cannot marry the one he loves, but must marry for the sake of his people's peace and prosperity. Similarly, the girl has no choice but to marry a leader she lacks romantic feelings for and, if it comes, she can only swallow the bitter jealousy and sadistic violence doled out by her husband.

While this sort of story-line emphasizes the importance of kingdom over personal affections, and the sacrifices young lovers make for the sake of the country, it also seems that the author prefers to describe romantic stories at the expense of the historical setting. Consequently, this novel is best categorized as a romance.

This audacious experiment in writing tackles a grand period of history and a multitude of historical figures that shuffle in and out. It gives free rein to the author's artistic imagination and innovatively describes and represents the Tuyuhun Kingdom and its migration to northwestern China.

General readers fond of traditional romances set in ancient times may find this book entertaining. Those interested in historical figures and records of the Tuyuhun will find ample material with each chapter introducing one generation of the kingdom until the most prosperous period of Tuyuhun development.

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NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Cheng Sinong 程丝浓

Cheng Siyu 程丝雨

Dongdu 东都

Gansu 甘肃

Huzhu 互助

Jiajiale 家家乐

Jin 晋 Dynasty

Kualü 夸吕

Li Zhuoma 李卓玛

Muliyang 慕利延

Qinghai hu 青海湖

Qinghai 青海

Sangshige 桑士哥

Shaanxi Normal University, Shaanxi shifan daxue 陕西师范大学

Shen Jie 沈杰

Shi Pi 视黑

Song 宋 Dynasty

Tang 唐 Dynasty

Tu 土

Tuyuhun 吐谷浑

Wushi 五十

Xianbei 鲜卑

Xiao Kejing 萧克敬

Xu Ning 徐宁

Ye Yan 叶延

Yi Huali 易华丽